

Rebecca Crow, Westcoast, RMIP, Regional Teaching Centre

I was one of the four lucky RMIP students to get selected to travel to rural Australia for a two-week exchange. Having not been out of the country since I was 12 I was rather excited about the adventure!

My first day there was a bit of an intro. The Bairnsdale hospital has four main wards (medical, surgical, rehabilitation and paediatrics/midwifery) and a bustling ED. There are two operating theatres and a psychiatric inpatient unit. The hospital is a GP-run hospital where every patient is under the care of their GP. The GPs visit the patients daily to organise the plan with the other medical staff. Junior doctors and senior physicians/surgeons on the wards then carry out the agreed plan and manage anything else that may arise during the day. There is a lot of multidisciplinary support including numerous community-based organisations. Ambulance and air transfers are made for any cases that require ICU-level care to Sale, Traralgon or Melbourne.



There were similarities and differences between their course and ours. The main focus of their teaching is clinically based with whole group tutorials with specialists via video conference once or twice a week. There are 9 medical students in and around Bairnsdale, so a few more than us. They each have a GP practice where they are based out of for the year. They then rotate around the different services such as obstetrics, psychiatry and theatre depending on the visiting specialists. While I was in Bairnsdale I was able to spend time in a couple of GP practices, on the medical ward and in theatre.

The first thing I noticed on the wards was that I knew none of the drug names the staff were using! The majority of drugs prescribed in Australia appear to be specific brands unlike NZ where we mainly prescribe drugs under their generic name. I was continually asking both doctors and patients what each of the medications actually were! Other than that I slotted into ward-life relatively smoothly, admitting patients and helping where I could. I was fortunate to spend some time at GEGAC the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative. GEGAC is a community-based organisation that was formed in 1975 which provides healthcare and cultural support to aborigines in the area for discounted rates or for free. The main aim of GEGAC is to help improve the health of aborigines. This is just a small part of the Australian-wide "Closing the Gap" initiative. Indigenous people have a much shorter expected lifespan than European Australians and poorer outcomes in nearly all aspects of health. This is a very similar situation to New Zealand and our Maori population. It was great to spend some time with the passionate people who run this organisation. They are doing some wonderful work to help lessen the health disparities.

The week I was here was NAIDOC week (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee). NAIDOC is aimed at increasing awareness of indigenous culture and highlighting the successes of various aborigines. Obviously things were buzzing at GEGAC!

One morning there was a big get-together at GEGAC before a march through the main street of town. There was a fantastic turnout with well over 300 people participating in the march. I spent the morning helping hand out t-shirts to the participants and chatting with the locals. There was so much enthusiasm from the volunteers and the whole event was humming with positivity. After the march a big barbeque was put on with carnival rides for the kids. It was such a fantastic event to be a part of. Everyone was



so welcoming and more than willing to share their stories. Despite being a kiwi I did not feel out of place. They would go out of their way to ask about my background and thank me for helping to support their cause. I felt privileged to mingle with such positive and inspirational people.

I had the opportunity to talk to several indigenous people in the clinic at GEGAC too. This was a very moving experience for me as some of their stories were traumatic and devastating. I met several people who were a part of the stolen generation where aboriginal-European mixed children were uplifted from their families and given to European families to bring up. I met people who had been subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse as children and adults. I was very grateful to have the opportunity to sit and listen to these narratives and gain an understanding about the darker times in Australia's history. As in all places in the world, including New Zealand, domestic violence is still an issue in Australia and is also overrepresented in the indigenous population. GEGAC provides a place for people to go where it is ok to talk about these issues and meet other people with similar experiences. It also provides referrals to counselling services for those who want someone to talk to. GEGAC is doing some really wonderful work to improve the situation in Gippsland and I feel privileged that I was able to get a glimpse into such a fantastic organisation.



I also spent some time in theatre. As Bairnsdale is a GP-run hospital all the anaesthetists are GP's who have done extra study (usually a diploma) through the college of anaesthetists. They were wonderful at getting me involved and had me doing all the airway management including putting down LMA's and intubating. The surgeons were happy for me to scrub-in and assist. I felt quite at home as the theatre-banter was still largely rugby orientated with the usual trans-tasman rivalry!

Not all my time was spent in the medical setting though! The Gippsland Medical School masquerade ball was on while I was there so Mary and I made sure to pack our dresses, shoes and masks! It was a great night and I met lots of lovely Aussie med students. Thanks to an open bar everyone was able to really let

their hair down for the night. It was great for everyone to forget about med, study and exams and kick our heels up! I also got out to Raymond Island which is well known for its koala population. Koalas were first introduced to the island in the 1950's in hope of creating a population to ensure the species if anything were to happen to the mainland population. The koalas thrived in the environment and the numbers are now close to 300. They are breeding so well in fact that a sterilization programme has had to be implemented to control numbers! We wandered along the koala trail and saw numerous dosing furballs! Only a couple were awake and feeding but one of these had a baby koala clinging on. Even the Aussie girls were excited to see this so I felt quite lucky!!



I also went to a small town called Buchan which is well known for its limestone caves. We took a tour through one and it was quite spectacular. There were huge rooms with thousands of stalactites and stalagmites connected by narrow, low, winding pathways. Some of these structures were huge and were thousands of years old. A lot of the passageways sparkled with the tiny crystals and it really was spectacular! The caves stay at a stable temperature of 17 degrees year round. This was quite balmy for us as it was a cold day outside! It is so hard to describe how beautiful a place it was, you really have to see it to understand. I definitely recommend it to

anyone if you find yourself out this way at some stage.

I was quite amazed at the amount of things I was able to pack into my time in Bairnsdale. I saw many interesting medical cases and was allowed to practice numerous skills on the wards, in theatre and at GP's. I got to trip around and see some of the local environment and got to party with the med students too! I learnt a lot about the health disparities between European and indigenous Australians which was interesting to compare and contrast between New Zealand's situation. I even got to have a quick look around Melbourne on my way back through, including the human body expo at Melbourne museum and an Aussie rules game!



Without the Pat Farry Trust I never would have had this fantastic opportunity so I am very grateful to everyone for creating the exchange programme and giving

rural NZ students the chance to experience something new and exciting.